Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences
https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-025-00452-5

ORIGINAL PAPER

Messianic Wilsonianism, an Exceptional Chauvinism? And How Thucydides' Trap Legitimizes America's "National Destiny"

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Received: 14 March 2025 / Revised: 28 May 2025 / Accepted: 1 June 2025
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Abstract
As one of the most discussed theories in IR, Thucydides' trap is based on the belief in US exceptionalism and the Wilsonian role of the US as champion of democracy, whereby the US presence in East Asia is taken for granted. Instead of confirming the loftiness of Wilsonianism, Allison's misleading creation, significantly informed by Huntington, shows that America's creedal nationalism is as an exceptional ideology that is different from other nationalisms in its appropriation and distortion of a particular political system and values as distinctively American, yet similar in the creation of conceptually feeble narratives. This interdisciplinary paper, which straddles political theory and nationalism scholarship, addresses Thucydides' trap as an attempt, steeped in America's distinct form of national chauvinism, to legitimize imperialism and messianic understandings of the US global reach through structural dynamics of power politics.

Keywords Thucydides' trap · Nationalism · Imperialism · Democracy · US–China relations

1 Introduction

In the last few years, one IR theory has resonated profusely among Western academics and political observers: Thucydides' trap. This theory, which American scholar Graham Allison notably formulated, allegedly captures the current US-Chinese competition comparing it to the confrontation between Athens and Sparta that in 431 B.C. resulted in the Peloponnesian War which Greek historian Thucydides, the father of political history, immortalized in his *History*. This thesis has

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Published online: 21 June 2025

been discussed at lengths from different angles, often it has been accepted as a fact, sometimes it has been rebuked as underlying a distorted and simplistic use of Classical Antiquity.[1] As several other theories coming from Harvard and other renowned American institutions, Allison's intuition has become public domain.[2] Considering that it has been shown how Allison's notion is based on a misleading translation that distorts the content of Thucydides' sentence he used as well as the ancient Greek context (Lee 2019; Maritan 2024), the ubiquity of Thucydides' trap across academia, journalism, and policymaking may appear problematic to those scholars concerned with the politics of knowledge production. Hence, its popularity and proximity to policymaking makes a further reconsideration of Thucydides' trap warranted.

While several observers and policymakers use Thucydides' trap to explain interstate relations and security issues in East Asia, these pages contend that the popularity of the notion has more to do with America's Gramscian cultural hegemony (hence the question of the politics of knowledge production) and a distinct form of chauvinism based on the appropriation of a political system, a particular strand of democracy, that has been used to legitimize the global reach of the US.[3] Thus, structural theories of interstate relations, this paper suggests, need to be read in the context of ideology, in particular the Wilsonian narrative that makes the American presence in East Asia (and beyond) not the result of imperialist encroachments but the natural consequence of a benign power driven by a messianic drive for the benefit of mankind.

Allison's interpretation of Thucydides, whereby a rising power threatens to displace a hegemonic power (Athens and Sparta respectively, according to Allison) and military confrontation is often inevitable, has now been borrowed in China, a fact that shows the appeal of Thucydides' trap (Chan 2021; Clark 2020; Gries and Jing 2019; Huang 2017; Ying 2016). Allison's *Destined for War* was a Sunday Times and Financial Times book of the year in 2017, with President Biden describing Allison as "one of the keenest observers of international affairs around. He consistently brings his deep understanding of history's currents to today's most difficult challenges and makes our toughest foreign policy dilemmas accessible to experts and

[1] Morley (2013, 2020a, b) and Johnson Bagby (1994) discussed present-day misuses of Thucydides. For realists' claims to be Thucydides' heirs, see Kulsmeyer (2011).

[2] Based on Google Scholar, Hanania (2021, 13) found that in 2013 there were only 23 works mentioning "China" and "Thucydides trap," while by 2019 more than 500 works did so.

[3] Toward the end of the paper, I contend that American democracy, which is what Western democracy has become, represents a distortion of the republican tradition of the *Federalist*, Kant and Montesquieu's "well-regulated democracy." While it is generally assumed that contemporary democracy is based on Montesquieu's separation of powers, it is so only in name. Contemporary democracy, as Wilson's, owes more to Jefferson's admiration of Destutt de Tracy's glorification of popular sovereignty—the government "of the people, by the people, for the people" enshrined in Lincoln's Gettysburg address—and scathing rejection of Montesquieu's separation of powers. While the republic of the *Federalist* was based on the idea of ruling *for* the people, that is for the benefit of the public, the version of democracy popularized and sacralized also among contemporary American scholars is rule *by* the people. Montesquieu, Kant, Publius (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay), Tocqueville, Mill, to name but a few, believed in meritocracy, in the need for a select political class, informed by wisdom, experience, expertise, and sense of service toward their community (beside limited suffrages, undemocratically for today). Popular sovereignty does not necessarily contemplate that.

everyday citizens alike." (Wang 2023) What is worrying is not that the notion is flawed, but that it is taken as a geopolitical fact (see Moore 2017; Zoellick 2013) and risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, since it has been adopted by the two contending parties to rationalize their rivalry (Chan 2018, 2021; Er 2016).

This paper maintains that Thucydides' trap became popular as an expression of American beliefs in the "manifest destiny" of the US, which coincided with the fin-de-siècle rise of the US as an overseas empire and was enshrined and legitimized in Theodore Roosevelt's and Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric. It was thus formulated at the right time, not because it captured the historical conjunction it analyzed, but because it portrayed events the ways its power of reference wanted them to be seen.[4] This discussion focuses on a key security question and great power competition, yet it may not appeal to scholars of security studies, since it addresses the Sino-American rivalry from a perspective that may well be considered heterodoxic within IR and thus dismissed as nonempirical. My argument is not based on any of the main schools of thought within IR theory, but on intellectual history, political theory, and the study nationalism as an ideology (and not as nationality or national culture, contrary to Anderson and several scholars following him), through engagement with several thinkers whose ideas have not become a mainstay of IR theory.

This article, problematizing Thucydides' trap as originating from concerns that are rooted in notions of national greatness, pushes for an engagement across the study of nationalism, political theory, and international relations, as "the phenomenon [of nationalism] remains more commonly debated in political sociology and history than in IR" (Lerner 2022, 995). Conversely, IR theories, like Thucydides' trap, have seldom been discussed as expressions of nationalist understandings of politics among states (as forms of chauvinism, slightly distinct from nationalism as a homogenizing force in domestic affairs, that is Mazzini's "theory of nationality" that Lord Acton found so dangerous for the preservation of multi-ethnic societies and local forms of life) or within nationalism studies. This article integrates Allison's notion into the study of nationalism by resorting to scholars who have been omitted in recent discussions of the use of Thucydides in IR or of Thucydides' trap itself.

By demonstrating that Thucydides' trap significantly draws on Huntington's belief in the unbridgeable chasm between Western and Chinese civilizations and is based on an imprecise translation that makes Thucydides fit common identifications of his work with realism, this discussion seeks to prove the inconsistencies of that part of Western academic discourse that matches political legitimations of the US–China rivalry by relying on US *nationalist* narratives and appropriations of the Classical past. Yet to blame the US for the East Asian stalemate, as Daniel Bell and Weng Pei (2020, 139) do, arguing that "if the United States genuinely wants to avoid war in the East Asian region, it should try to accommodate and make concessions to China's desire to establish a regional hierarchy with itself at the head of the table," whereby South Korea should accept the loss of its full sovereignty, since, as they argue, "sometimes less powerful countries need to make the best of less-than-ideal solutions," is to

[4] In the Chinese context, the success of certain views, due to the appeal exercised on those in power, well applies to Bell and Pei's (2020) justifying China's hegemonic ambitions in East Asia, on which later.

pay lip service to Chinese revanchism offering a "realist" understanding of interstate relations from the perspective of China's supposed "national interest," namely "the development of an East Asian *tianxia* hierarchy led by China."[5] Yet this but boils down to Thrasymachus' paradox found in Plato's *Republic*, whereby power is cloaked under the subtle pretext of justice (Maritan 2024).

While Elie Kedourie (1960, 64) underpinned the distinctions between nationalism and patriotism–often dismissed in nationalism studies as untenable, since it is considered to be based on the normative distinction between "my patriotism, your nationalism," when patriotism, historically, well precedes nationalism—he did not consider attachment to American institutions to imply a form of nationalism. He argued that it is.

> loose and inexact to speak […] of British or American nationalism when describing the thought of those who recommend loyalty to British or American political institutions. A British or an American nationalist would have to define the British or the American nation in terms of language, race, or religion, to require that all those who conform to the definition should belong to the British or American state.

This paper precisely argues that American "patriotism" is nationalist in its exaltation of the American nation in ideological, and therefore religious, terms and the merging of the "essence" of being American with a distinct creed, as Hans Kohn (1957) showed. Contrary to Kohn, though, it argues that the American "creedal" nationalism to which he referred is not that different from other nationalisms in the creation of myths that do not hold in light of historiography or political theory, the conviction in the "national destiny" of one's own country, and the firm belief in or acritical acceptance of doctrines that are considered to be integral to belonging to "the nation," with Thucydides' trap being the latest notable theory informed by, and in turn legitimizing, such beliefs.

This article is organized as follows: first it introduces the notion of Thucydides' trap, showing why it is misleading. Then, it seeks to explain in what respect this theory is an expression of a distinct form of American chauvinism, steeped in stereotyped Wilsonian narratives about popular sovereignty. Section three and four enlarge on the idea that Thucydides' trap is based on chauvinistic premises. This part is followed by a theoretical discussion that tries to assess whether Wilsonianism really represents lofty principles, and eventually addresses the paradoxical symbiosis of democracy with empire, showing how the American democratic creed originates from a Jeffersonian misappropriation of the republican tradition that swept Montesquieu and the *Federalist* aside through distortions that made majority rule, not responsible government, the mainstay of US political life. The closing section ties Allison's abuses of Classical Antiquity and stereotyped repetitions of the sanctity

[5] To rebuke Thucydides' trap as misleading does not necessarily imply rejecting structural analyses tout court. For example, Balazs Szanto (2025, 178) clearly provided "a grim overview of the strategic reality facing Taiwan" as part of realist intepretations of Cross-Strait relations, without recourse to Thucydides.

of popular sovereignty as expressions of a chauvinism premised on legitimizing the global reach of the US.

2 Inventing Thucydides' Trap

Allison's notion is based on ideological premises that, as this paper argues, reflect an exceptional form of American chauvinism rooted in the Wilsonian belief in America's role as champion of "freedom and democracy." As Allison (2017b, 84) himself stated, "for Americans, democracy is the only just form of government: authorities derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed." This "democratic chauvinism," typical of Wilson's doctrine, was yet based on the imperialist "civilizing mission," whereby "inferior" peoples had to be tutored into the arts of governments, as Wilson (1902) clearly stated during the conflict that led to the US annexation of the Philippines in 1902. This mindset has been integral to the narrative of US administrations, even when bolstering anti-Communist military dictatorships from Latin America to East Asia in the name of "democracy, human rights, and freedom." Allison (2017b, 84) exemplified the unshaken belief in this trope, stating that "over the decades, Washington has pursued a foreign policy that seeks to advance the cause of democracy—even, on occasion, attempting to impose it on those who have failed to embrace it themselves."

Kissinger (1994, 804), a key figure of the paradoxical promotion of democracy through the support of military dictatorships, well summarized the sense of triumphalism found among the American public, and famously expressed by Fukuyama in his famed *End of History*, as the belief whereby "by the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, Wilsonianism seemed triumphant." Accordingly, President Clinton claimed that "in a new era of peril and opportunity, our overriding purpose must be to expand and strengthen the world's community of market-based democracies." (Kissinger 1994, 805) Similarly, in his initial support of the invasion of Iraq, Fukuyama (2004a) wrote about America's "ability not just to win wars but to help create self-sustaining democratic political institutions and robust market-oriented economies," promoting American capitalist democracy abroad.[6] Allison's theory is informed by similar Wilsonian notions steeped in the uniqueness of the US, while also being based on transplanting Huntington's civilizational allegiances to the context of US-Chinese relations, confirming America's beliefs in its noble ideals against an incompatible value system (Allison 2017a, b).[7] According to

[6] Consider Montesquieu's (1734, 144) words, though: "the desire to force their own laws and customs upon all peoples is the folly of conquerors." Similar motives as Fukuyama's can be found in Thomas Barnett's (2004, 356) *The Pentagon's New Map*, in which the author subtly changes America's global reach with the word "connectivity": "all we can offer is choice, the connectivity to escape isolation, and the safety within which freedom finds practical expression. None of this can be imposed, only offered." I am grateful to Balazs Szanto for his helpful insights.

[7] Barnett (2003) offers a clear and influential case of such beliefs in the role of the US in exporting security and democracy, with democracy uncritically accepted as a value in itself: "all has to begin with security, because free markets and democracy cannot flourish amid chronic conflict."

Allison (2017b, 81), "in the case of the United States and China, Thucydidean risks are compounded by civilizational incompatibility between the two countries, which exacerbates their competition and makes it more difficult to achieve rapprochement." This Huntingtonian component of Allison's thought is usually overlooked in discussions of Thucydides' trap. And while Huntington (1996, 316) argued that "in the coming era, […] the avoidance of major intercivilizational wars requires core states to refrain from intervening in conflicts in other civilizations [, …] a truth which some states, particularly the United States, will undoubtedly find difficult to accept," pushing for a restraint foreign policy, he was as adamant an endorser of the spread of market-based democracies (Huntington 1991).

Whatever the differences between these works, their distinct similarities beg the following question: what are their ideological underpinnings as expressions of US power? Messianic Wilsonianism, which coincides with the belief in the role of the US to make the world "safe for democracy," as Wilson (1918, 195) famously put it in 1917—in short to export America's own political system abroad—and the notion of US exceptionalism as a civilization founded on lofty "Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, […][which] often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures," (Huntington 1996, 42), a conviction that informs Allison's views on the unbridgeable differences between the US and China, make for a distinct form of nationalism.[8] As axioms, that is as uncontested guiding principles of foreign policy, beliefs in American exceptionalism are integral to Thucydides' trap, which shows the extent of the inconsistency of such ideological assumptions, cloaked in seemingly profound historical analogies, which yet are "superficial, oversimplified, overconfident," as Jonathan Kirshner (2018, 12), perhaps too harshly, assessed Allison's work. And their simplicity and popularity may be ascribed to what Anderson (1983, 5) called the "philosophical poverty" of nationalism tied to its accessibility across the public.[9]

Thucydides' trap is an invention that, as most nationalist tropes, impinges present-day dynamics and issues on the past, in this case ancient Greece. It is informed by beliefs in US exceptionalism, which was symptomatic of the jingoism of part of US public opinion in the late nineteenth century, and which was expressed by Theodore Roosevelt's belief in America's "manifest destiny," which Wilson endorsed as early as 1901. And it is symptomatic of the tendency among part of the American intelligentsia to devise seemingly nuanced theories that legitimize America's "manifest destiny."

Allison's trap is based on Americano-centric perspectives steeped in the messianic role of the US as promoter of "freedom" and "democracy," typical of American slogans even before the onset of what came to be known as Wilsonianism, as can

[8] For a summary of discording views on American nationalism, see Fuller (2007).

[9] This is one of the very few times that Anderson mentioned nationalism as an ideology, and not as national culture or sense of nationality. The premise of this paper is that nationalism is a specific ideology about the nation and nationality (or nationhood), but none of these in themselves, as historians Kedourie, George Mosse, and Eugen Weber had it.

be seen in Franklin Henry Giddings' (1901, 11–12) emphasis on the compatibility of democracy with empire, "the democratic empire," "that empire which the United States is destined to create, and which we hope may, in the coming centuries, be as strong, as free, as broad as any that the world has ever seen," as he stated in the context of American early expansion into the Pacific. This rhetoric, based on the sanctity of popular sovereignty, has been constitutive of America's Wilsonian nationalism throughout the twentieth century;[10] it either shows the unique character of American nationalism, insofar as it is based on seemingly sophisticated theories, or, on the contrary, the weakness of such theories, which stand as the American counterpart of the construction of national genealogies and primordial myths that are integral to other nationalisms throughout the globe.

According to Allison, his endorsers and most critics, Thucydides' trap can be gleaned from Thucydides' words. Yet the ancient Greek historian never wrote the words Allison attributes to him (Morley 2020b). Allison (2015) argued that "the Greek historian's metaphor reminds us of the attendant dangers when a rising power rivals a ruling power—as Athens challenged Sparta in ancient Greece." The sentence in question is only one, from which Allison (2017a, b, vii) derives his Thucydides' trap: "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable." First, metaphors are a figure of speech, and here there is only a comparison that Allison draws between present-day and past contexts. Secondly, the ancient Greek context was different. Athens was not a rising power, and Sparta was not *the* hegemonic power: the two city-states were both the leading powers in the Greek world. Finally, and more importantly, the key sentence from Thucydides (2006, 81) that Allison used to come up with his Thucydides' trap is different in the translation on which Allison had worked: "The truest cause, but the one least spoken about openly, I consider to be the Athenians' growing power and the fear they caused [by this growth] to the Lacedaemonians." The original Greek for the Athenians' growing power runs as follows, "τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἡγοῦμαι μεγάλους γιγνομένους" (*tous Athenaious egoumai megalous gignomenous*), which is different from a simple "rise."[11] Even in Hobbes' (1843, 93) seventeenth-century translation, Thucydides referred to "the Lacedaemonians [giving] sentence that the peace was broken and that war was to be made […] for fear the Athenian greatness should still increase. For they saw that a great part of Greece was fallen already into their hands."

Although Hobbes' translation was edited and revisited by Molesworth in the nineteenth century, the meaning of Thucydides' words was not altered, contrary to what Allison did with Crawley's translation, when he changed "the growth of the power of Athens" into "the rise of Athens," thus distorting the original meaning, making

[10] While David Fromkin (1994, 109) brilliantly explained that "Wilsonianism is not any political program of which Woodrow Wilson was the author; nor was it any program of which he was the original political sponsor; nor was it any coherent body of doctrine or principle guiding the president in arriving at his decisions," Wilson repeatedly expressed his ardent belief in "democracy" and the exceptional nature of the US.

[11] See Marchant's edition of Thucydides (1905, 21).

the ancient Greek context fit his interpretation of present-day geopolitics.[12] In his commentary to Thucydides, then Oxford Fellow Marchant (1905, 172) made it clear that it is about the "growing greatness of Athens," not a simple rise, while pointing to other passages where Thucydides refers to "the Athenian greatness," which had come into being in the intervening 50 years since the Persian wars (*Pentacontaetia*). The original Greek for the supposed "rise" is μεγάλους γιγνομένους (*megalous gignomenous*), which yet refers to Athens growing ever more, not to a simple rise. Hobbes' (1843) translation reflects this "growing greatness," which does not imply a mere rise or the fact that Athens was less powerful than Sparta: "and the truest quarrel, though least in speech, I conceive to be the growth of the Athenian power, which putting the Lacedaemonians into fear necessitated the war."

Most critics of Thucydides' trap fall in the same trap as Allison, since they rely on his flawed translation. According to Allison (2015), "Thucydides told a story of fear. 'It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable.'" But this is Allison's inaccurate adaptation of an English translation from the ancient Greek. As Allison (2017a, b, 297) stated, he had "adapted [translations] to more modern English syntax," in what is a misleading practice that distorts the actual meaning of Thucydides' words.

Critics use Allison's adaptation attributing his words to Thucydides. Gross Stein (2022) writes about "the increasingly granular debate over whether the trap identified by the great historian, Thucydides, speaks to contemporary policy issues" and "the story Thucydides tells of the fear a hegemon experiences as it contemplates a rising challenger." Yet the only time Gross Stein references Thucydides directly, the sentence is Allison's adaptation (for similar examples see Yoder 2019 and Zhang 2019). Similarly, Tooze (2021) repeats this inaccurate translation when he writes that "the ancient historian saw war with Sparta as an inevitable consequence of Athens's growing power." Analogous misinterpretations can be found among the leading contributors to the *Financial Times*. Tett (2021) wrote: "Allison argued—as Thucydides himself first noted—that whenever a ruling power is challenged by a fast-rising rival, it traps them in a pattern that can easily spark war," while Rachman (2018) reasoned that "it remains open to question whether patterns of state behaviour that emerged in ancient Greece will still prevail in the nuclear age." Yet Thucydides argued all this only if we rely on Allison's flawed adaptation of the English translation. Leteiner (2006, 744), in his commentary to Thucydides, stated that "Thucydides devotes a long excursus to the growth of Athenian power (1.89–117). He may be right that Athenian power and imperial intentions reached such intensity that the Spartans in fear thought they had to stop them soon—or never. Thucydides is not a determinist. Nowhere does he assert that the war was "inevitable," a dangerous word for cool heads," showing well before the invention of Thucydides' trap (Allison's, not Wouk's) that the whole debate around Thucydides' trap is inconsistent at the core.

[12] For Crawley's version, see Thucydides (1874, 15). While Lee (2019) mentions misleading translations, it was Allison's adaptation that was inaccurate.

3 Problematizing Thucydides' Trap as an Expression of US Nationalism

It may be contended that discussing Allison's interpretation of Thucydides is an arcane historiographical and philological debate of little theoretical and policy relevance. Yet understanding how Thucydides' trap is an invention rooted in persistent Wilsonian beliefs in US exceptionalism helps underscore the extent to which structural dynamics of interstate relations are often framed in ways that take for granted that the US is driven by lofty principles, whereby "freedom" is coupled with "democracy" in typical Freedom House terms (see, for example, Tilly 2007). That a rising power with revanchist ambitions may be a threat to a hegemonic power does not make Thucydides' trap real; it shows how the drive for power is integral to understandings of international relations, as Morgenthau (1948, 7–8) showed considering "the aspiration for power of sovereign nations [… the] moving force [of world politics]," for which Thucydides' *History* is seen as an early example (Garst 1989). Yet Thucydides' trap is a further interpretation of structural dynamics of power, based on misleading notions and abuses of the past. It is the way structural dynamics are used by Allison that is of interest to the political theorist and historian of ideas.

While the realist and neoliberal schools of thought share in "the assumption that the absence of a sovereign authority that can make and enforce binding agreements creates opportunities for states to advance their interests unilaterally and makes it important and difficult for states to cooperate with one another" (Jervis 1999, 43), seemingly confirming the core of Thucydides' trap, Allison's abuse of Thucydides taps into neoconservative and hegemonic realist beliefs in the US role as guarantor of world destinies, integral to nationalist understandings of the American nation. By creating a structural parallel between Ancient Greece and contemporary East Asia, Allison offers a monocausal explanation of war rooted in structural dynamics of power that dismiss questions of human agency and ideology (Chan 2019), the latter in turn creating these same interpretations.

As to his critics, Allison (2017a, b, 287) wrote that "in academic debate, scholars frequently prefer to attack straw men rather than contest a stated thesis […] [and that] critics have repeatedly incinerated the same straw men." One of these is selection bias, which Chan (2020) pointed out. Yet to emphasize the question of translation and invention (see Lee 2019; Maritan 2024) is not a straw man, since attacking straw men implies attacking distorted versions of others' arguments, not the actual argument: Thucydides did not state the words Allison attributes to him. This invention shows how even supposedly subtle interpretations of the US role in world politics are based on as simplistic (albeit more elaborate) and distorting interpretations as other nationalisms.

Relying on Huntington's (1991) description of Confucianism, whereby Confucianism is seen as antithetical to Western culture and its undemocratic nature is considered problematic, while Confucian meritocracy and rulers' accountability are dismissed, Allison (2017a, b) shows his indebtedness to Huntington's Americanocentrism and Sinophobia—the intellectual premises for Thucydides' trap—stating:

> the general sturdy strands of Chinese culture […] have persisted through the centuries. What is more, they provide pointers to ways in which it is distinct, and in some ways incompatible, with the cultures of Western nations like the United States. Being overtaken by a rival who shares common values—such as Britain grudgingly watching an upstart America surpass its power but largely preserve its cultural, religious, and political beliefs—is one thing. It would be quite another to be surpassed by an adversary whose values are so strikingly different.

American anxieties over the relative loss of prestige of US power and waning influence abroad are tied to the rise of China, with "US resistance to the loss of power and prestige" being one of the possible factors shaping East Asian geopolitics, according to Arrighi (1998, 75). Kissinger (1994, 36) addressed these worries stating that "by the time of the Monroe Doctrine's centennial, its meaning had been gradually expanded to justify American hegemony in the Western hemisphere. […] The Monroe Doctrine justified American intervention not only against an existing threat but against any possibility of an overt challenge."[13]

Anxieties over American primacy as voiced by Allison underlie a concern that is essentially nationalist, expressed through theories that, similarly to other nationalist narratives, fall in gross pitfalls, in this case a wrong translation that abuses anachronistically ancient Greek history. Emphasizing Allison's translation is no mere philological pedantry. Instead of being interpreted for what it tells, the past is manufactured and tailored to fit present-day purposes, as with other nationalisms. The purpose of such interpretations is to make sense of challenges to the global role of the US and ensuing possible power transition, which for Allison, as for Huntington earlier, in the East Asian context consist of the Chinese challenge to US hegemony in the region. This hegemony is justified also by Allison in typically Wilsonian terms, in the idea that, notwithstanding the impossibility of making democracy universal, the US has been the champion of *the* political system, democracy.

Yet even the original Wilsonianism, based on "making the world safe for democracy," dismissed the non-Western world as the backstage of Western powers, showing the extent to which Western double standards were ingrained even among those who were considered, misleadingly, progressive (Manela 2006, 1344). As a coeval and vocal critic of Wilson, David Jayne Hill (1920, 593) captured Wilson's paradox, still present in Allison's and other American scholars' beliefs, as "the trailing mantle of Mr. Wilson's apostolate of peace through the pledge of war." And this has proved to be the pattern of US foreign policy for almost a century, namely a fight for hegemony cloaked in a rhetoric of spreading democracy for the benefit of mankind. Little mattered that in the process the US would replace democratically elected governments with military dictators, a practice legitimized by security concerns for the "free" world.[14] As Huntington (1996, 313) put it three decades ago in ways preceding the core of Thucydides' Trap, "the emergence of China as the dominant power in East

[13] While Lee (2019) argues that "the concept of Thucydides' Trap may have little to do with the actual history of the Peloponnesian War," he accepts structural interpretations of interstate relations.

[14] It is no wonder that Kissinger, a master at toppling down those democratic governments that did not fit US interests, was nonetheless well versant in Wilsonian rhetoric, as evinced by his own words.

and Southeast Asia would be contrary to American interests as they have been historically construed. Given this American interest, how might war between the United States and China develop?" The invention of Thucydides' trap and its popularity are premised on such "historically construed" American interests in East Asia, which are imperial legacies originating from America's "manifest destiny," whereby, as Wilson (1902, 734) himself stated, the twentieth century would be "the century that shall see [the US] a great power in the world," a nation, as he said a few years later, in 1915, "that knows that it must command the respect of the world." (Wilson 1918, 94).

4 Nationalist and Imperialist Undertones of Thucydides' Trap

Examining the conceptual flaws of Thucydides' trap as an expression of American nationalism may show how even the unchallenged foundations of American exceptionalism are based on a form of chauvinism rooted in theoretical premises that do not hold in light of historical evidence and political theory. Linking US sense of exceptionalism and Wilsonianism to Thucydides' trap may generate new insights since Wilsonianism is often taken for granted as a lofty doctrine legitimizing US meddling overseas, while Thucydides' trap has become common currency in the scholarly literature and journalism.

Already in the early twentieth century, Max Weber (1968, 397) argued that "feelings of identity subsumed under the term 'national' are not uniform but may derive from diverse sources: […] shared political memories, religion, language and, finally, racial features may be source of the sense of nationality." In the American context, the "creedal" nature that Hans Kohn (1957) studied, and to which Mylonas and Tudor (2021) refer in their overview of nationalism studies, is often seen in positive terms, as the belief in the benign force of popular sovereignty. In foreign policy, this belief translates into Wilsonianism, which is shared among American scholars and policymakers from Kissinger, Keohane, and Huntington, to Fukuyama and Allison. Yet the democratic creed is tied to the notion of power, to what Weber (1968, 398) called the "pathetic pride in the power of one's own community."

Tying US nationalism to Allison's invention is not as haphazard as it may seem. First, Allison (2017a, xix) bases his belief in the incompatibility between the American and Chinese civilizations on Huntington, stating:

> the sheer scale and ambition of th[e] "China Dream" should disabuse us of any notion that the contest between China and the United States will naturally subside as China becomes a "responsible stakeholder." This is especially so given what […] Huntington famously called a "clash of civilizations," a historical disjunction in which fundamentally different Chinese and American values and traditions make rapprochement between the two powers even more elusive.

Secondly, in the case of Thucydides' trap, which describes American anxieties over power transition, one may find a peculiarly nationalist concern with the receding role of the US on the international scene. As historian Eugen Weber put it, in

what represents possibly one of the clearest explanations of nationalism as distinct from patriotism—when the two are generally merged by contemporary scholars of nationalism, who also conflate nationality or national identities with nationalism (see, for example, Miller 1995; Mylonas and Tudor 2023; Tamir 2019), a misgiving found also in Anderson (1983, 141–3)

> nationalism […] represents the acute form of national patriotism: more xenophobic, more chauvinistic, more exclusivist and strident than the original because it is, or claims to be, about the nation under siege, the nation betrayed or about to be, the nation threatened by foes […]. Where patriotism is about attachment, nationalism is about anxiety. […] When the nation is in crisis (when nationalists claim it is), nationalism is about mobilizing, arming, bending all energies, to defend national entity and national identity against manifold threats (Weber 1996, 292).

With Allison and leading American scholars of IR, the threat is represented by China, the nation under siege is the US, sometimes even on the American continent itself (Motin 2022), but paradoxically the siege is often over American hegemony, or its semblance, in East Asia (see, for example, Mearsheimer 2019), if not the entire globe. The nation in crisis, or claims that it is, coincide with American anxieties over its global role. This is where nationalism meets imperialism; concerns over the *Pax americana*, essentially imperialist, are nationalist because America as a nation still has claims to universality. Patriotism, then, needs to be seen as distinct from nationalism, which is but "the acute form of national patriotism," as Eugen Weber (1996, 292) put it. Even Gellner (1983, 138) argued that "nationalism is a species of patriotism distinguished by a few very important features: the units which this kind of patriotism, namely nationalism, favours with its loyalty, are culturally homogeneous."

Yet Bieber (2020, 3) stated that "the distinction between 'good' patriotism and 'bad' nationalism offers little help in understanding the dynamics of either." Similarly, Brubaker (2004, 120) reasoned "that attempts to distinguish good patriotism from bad nationalism neglect the intrinsic ambivalence and polymorphism of both. Patriotism and nationalism are not things with fixed natures; they are highly flexible political languages, ways of framing political arguments by appealing to the patria, the fatherland, the country, the nation."[15] Absolutely, yet they do remain distinct, insofar as they are precisely different ways of appealing to the "patria," as also Viroli (1995, 161) argued, stating that "the ideological victory of the language of nationalism has relegated the language of patriotism to the margins of contemporary

[15] A few lines below, Brubaker (2004, 121–4) argues in "Millerian" terms that "the language of nationhood can help foster the integration of immigrants. Critics of nationalism often argue that nationalism […] excludes ethnically or culturally distinct others, or that the homogenizing logic of the nation-state denies recognition to 'difference'. But one should be careful not to reify nationalism or the nation-state," concluding that "national citizenship—and therefore national solidarity and patriotism—should not be consigned to the dustbin of history." Yet Brubaker, similarly to Anderson before him, does not consider that those who criticize nationalism do so because they often consider it to be different from patriotism, when for him and Miller patriotism and national identities constitute nationalism. Yet if we resort not only to Kedourie and Eugen Weber, but also Gellner, this conflation is misleading.

political thought." Even Kedourie (1960, 73–74), now often dismissed possibly because of Gellner's and Anderson's negative comments to his work, argued that

> it may serve to distinguish nationalism from patriotism and xenophobia with which it is often confused. Patriotism, affection for one's country, or one's group, loyalty to its institutions, and zeal for its defense, is a sentiment known among all kinds of men; so is xenophobia, which is dislike of the stranger, the outsider, and reluctance to admit him into one's own group. Neither sentiment depends on a particular anthropology and neither asserts a particular doctrine of the state or of the individual's relation to it. Nationalism does both; it is a comprehensive doctrine which leads to a distinctive style of politics.[16]

Thirdly, Allison's idiosyncratic American perspective, steeped in supposedly lofty Wilsonian motives, overlooks fundamental historical evidence to do with Western encroachments in East Asia, possibly representing a typically nationalist manipulation of the wealth of historical material. As Hobson (1902, 325) put it, "it is in China that the spirit and methods of Western Imperialism […] are likely to find their most crucial test," while it was "the United States, whose interest in China for investment and for trade is developing faster than any European Power, [which would make her] certainly insist upon an open door, and will soon be in a position to back her claim by strong naval force." (Hobson 1902, 331) And in a similar way Du Bois (1917, 443) wrote: "where sections could not be owned by one dominant nation there came a policy of 'Open Door,' but the 'Door' was open 'to white people only'." In any event, emphasis on Hobson is necessary for three main reasons. In the first place, he is dismissed among realists and leading American scholars of IR. Secondly, he underpinned the rise of the US in the late nineteenth century concomitantly with Western and Japanese annihilation of China, showing how US power would develop in East Asia at the expense of China, as the US rise on the world stage, far from being exceptional (Sondhaus 2007), was concomitant with "the joint attack of Western Powers in China." (Hobson 1902, 330).

Thirdly, Hobson's insights redefine the notion of the "national interest," central to realism, as mere sectional interests within society, thus making realist structural interpretations of power politics, including questions of power transition, the politics of certain vested interests within states. Hobson (1902, 329–30) prophetically explained the rise of China and Chinese distrust of Western motives in the following terms: "it is […] conceivable that China might so turn the tables upon the Western industrial nations, and, either by adopting their capital and organisers or, as is more probable, by substituting her own, might flood their markets with her cheaper manufactures, and refusing their imports in exchange might take her payment in liens

[16] For their part, Mylonas and Tudor (2023, 61), in their otherwise compelling work, stated the following: "that nationalism could be used to energize various political projects was well understood by […] Tocqueville (2000[1835]: 89), who singled out nationalism and religion together as the only two forces which could unite a society: 'there is in this world only patriotism, or religion, which can make all citizens walk for long towards a common goal.'" Yet Tocqueville (1840, 270) never used the term "nationalism," but "patriotism," which shows the extent to which this misleading conflation is now integral to the study of nationalism.

upon their capital, reversing the earlier process of investment until she gradually obtained financial control over her quondam patrons and civilisers."

Dispelling the validity of Thucydides' trap shows how the subtle nature of American nationalism has not changed since then and that it is legitimized through seemingly potent theories, which are yet conceptually flawed, as for other nationalisms. Allison's theory confirms the nationalist and not so unique character of American ideology, notwithstanding claims to the opposite. The paper thus challenges the conventional wisdom and provides counterintuitive insights that show how one of the most fashionable theories in IR is built on as basic a mistake as a wrong translation, with only few works to-date mentioning the question of translation (see Lee 2019; Morley 2020b; Maritan 2024).

The discussion partly agrees with the earlier Morgenthau, whose views contradictorily chime with Hannah Arendt's, on the impact of nationalism on world politics. Insisting on the nationalist, and not simply "patriotic," nature of US foreign policy provides an addition to critiques of Eurocentric interpretations of international politics: whereas US foreign policy, even when understood as imperialist, is still seen as promoting democracy and human rights, and thus inaccurately described as "liberal" (see Ikenberry 2004), yet seldom as nationalist, the foreign policy of other states is legitimately understood as being dictated by nationalist ideologies. Yet the paper rejects Morgenthau's realism and interpretation of imperialism. While Morgenthau (1948, 30) considered Marxian and Hobson's interpretations of imperialism to be different from "the 'devil theory' of imperialism [which] operates on a much lower intellectual level than its two companion theories," whereby "imperialism and war in general amount to […] a conspiracy of evil capitalists for the purpose of private gain," he outright dismissed Hobson's and Marxist interpretations of empire limiting them to this sole mention.[17]

As the founder of realism, Morgenthau's own dismissal of Hobson's study of imperialism led to the latter's oblivion within much of IR scholarship.[18] This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature, insofar as views that condone imperialism are intertwined with considering the benign role of the US as the promoter of "freedom

[17] Morgenthau (1948, 31) stated that compared to previous centuries, "the colonial acquisitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are small," when, apart from Spain and Portugal, the territories of European empires exponentially increased from the 1880s, thus providing a distorting view of the high point of imperialism in the late nineteenth century.

[18] For another negative appraisal of Hobson, see Kedourie's (1970, 5–10) *Nationalism and Asia and Africa*. Yet Kedourie based his criticism on a partial reading of Hobson's *Imperialism*, which has become the standard in perceptions of Hobson's work. Kedourie (1970, 10) stated that "the circumstances in which European governments have annexed such territories have been varied and complicated, and certainly not to be reduced to some simple economic impulse such as the insatiable appetite of financiers for easy and exorbitant profits." Yet Hosbon argued that it was the particular features of the new imperialism beginning around 1870 to have been triggered by certain vested economic interests. Hobson (1902, 113) did not argue that militarism or missionary zeal was not a component of the new imperialism, but they had been harnessed by the interests of the financial classes: "the economic root of imperialism is the desire for strong organised industrial and financial interests to secure and develop at the pubic expense and by the public force private markets for their surplus goods and their surplus capital. War, militarism, and a 'spirited foreign policy' are the necessary means to this end. This policy involves large increase in public expenditure."

and democracy," which can be found in Allison, as in Kissinger, Fukuyama, or Ikenberry. As Hook (2007, 191) conceptualized US beliefs in its national destiny:

> the "grand narrative" of American exceptionalism sets the United States apart from the warlike peoples of other nations, while justifying US military interventions in the name of liberty and universal moral values. This exceptional self-image aside, the conduct of US foreign policy throughout its history, including an unending pattern of coercive diplomacy and military interventions, is consistent with the imperial policies of Old World states founded on realpolitik.

While Brubaker (1999, 65) wrote that "emphasis on a constitutive political creed echoes an older literature on American nationalism, according to which national identity was essentially ideological and therefore uniquely open," this paper does not look at American nationalism as constitutive of identities, but examines it in relation to foreign policy through one of its most recent creations, Thucydides' trap. It contends that the creation of such theories, instead of confirming American exceptionalism, on which they rest, shows the similarity of US nationalism to other nationalisms. On the one hand, these findings are explicative of a larger international phenomenon, the unabated strength of nationalism in international affairs, understood as the affirmation of one's own nation at the expense of other nations (and not as self-determination, nation-building or patriotism as is often assumed); on the other, the findings are specific to US-Chinese relations, given the focus on Thucydides' trap and the key difference between China, whose leadership professes commitment to international peace (Lee et al. 2024), and the warlike dictatorial regimes overtly challenging the West. It is in relation to China that US anxieties over its prominence, as exemplified by Allison (2015), Mearsheimer (2010), and Walt (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016), reveal US nationalist concerns with national greatness and economic primacy (Milanovic 2020).

As Jervis (1994, 853) glossed in his appraisal of Morgenthau's thought, "political science is a very trendy discipline. Few books or articles are cited a decade […] after they are written. When scholars die, their ideas often die with them, although they may be reinvented later and trumpeted as new." While "Morgenthau is a rare, if partial, exception to this generalization," other scholars have been superficially handed down or sidelined altogether. Here, reliance on Hobson and Strauss partly obviates the issue posed by intellectual fads.[19] In reproposing Thucydides' trap as a geopolitical and historical fact (see, for example, Moore 2017), discussions revolving around this notion have either missed fundamental aspects of Greek political history or points that were already available more than half a century ago, and which this paper seeks to reintroduce.

[19] Strauss is often cited as neoconservatism's trailblazer, yet without consistent engagement with his works on political philosophy, which can be found among scholars who have specifically focused on him (see Ferrari 1997; Burns 2015; Burns 2021). Eurocentric inconsistencies appear also in Strauss (1946b, 43), including the idea that "the West is the culture in which culture reaches full self-consciousness, it is the final culture."

5 The Ideological Foundations of Allison's Trap

The missionary zeal of the US is acknowledged by both Huntington and Allison, yet it is framed as a lofty Wilsonian practice. When the two question the universal applicability of democracy, though, their belief in the benign nature of democratic politics remains unshaken. Allison, informed by Huntington, does not question the desirability of democracy; he wonders whether its adoption is feasible across the world, questioning the belief that "most Americans [have] that democratic rights will benefit anyone, anywhere in the world." (Allison 2017b, 84) In any case, his conviction in the superiority of democracy, integral to American chauvinism, matches Wilsonian notions.

While the link between the translation issue and the supposed American nationalism at the basis of Allison's theory might seem preposterous, Allison's Thucydides' trap is based on supposed civilizational differences between the West and China for which Allison relied entirely on Huntington. This is the cultural matrix of Allison, which goes missing if one focusses solely on the structural dynamics of power transition at the basis of Thucydides' trap, a simple sentence that is the result of an abuse of Thucydides' work and Ancient Greek history (Kirshner 2018; Maritan 2024; Morley 2020b; Silverstone 2024). And the anxieties over US primacy and loss of status in East Asia in the face of China, that Thucydides' trap describes, are essentially imperialist and nationalist concerns with national greatness, considering that Arendt, as well as Hobson earlier, studied imperialism as an outgrowth of national chauvinism.

An aspect that goes possibly unnoticed in discussions of Thucydides' trap, and that perhaps represents the link between Allison's invention and American messianic nationalism, is Allison's heavy indebtedness to Huntington. Allison (2017a, b, 147) confirmed this overreliance on his former colleague stating that

> if Huntington is correct—and I believe he is—that civilizational differences are growing more, not less, significant as sources of conflict, statesmen in China and the United States today should exercise greater modesty about what they can accomplish. Misunderstandings are easy; empathy and consensus elusive. In a globalized world, and a time of instant communication and rapid travel that makes the Macartney mission look positively Stone Age, the "clash of civilizations" could shape not only future diplomacy but also the course of war.

In this context, Allison (2017a, b, 134) discussed at lengths British envoy Macartney's mission to Beijing in 1793 simply as an attempt to establish diplomatic relations and "open new ports and markets for British goods, and negotiate a more flexible system for conducting trade in the coastal province of Canton." Allison's account chimed with what Arrighi, Ahmad, and Shih (1999, 228) described as the view "that the [soon to be] Opium War was not really about opium, but about a general interest in diplomatic equality and commercial opportunity, [which] became standard in Western historiography." On the contrary, Arrighi, Ahmad and Shih (1999, 227) had explained how the view of "China as the antithesis of the forming European hegemonic state prepared the way for the rising clash of civilizations that culminated in the

Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–58. The Opium Wars were fought primarily to decide whether the British or the Chinese view of law, government, ad morality would prevail, not in the abstract, but within the domains of the Chinese empire itself."

Such insights go missing in Allison, who transforms predatory imperialist interests, whether British or American, into lofty ambitions. While most nationalisms are based on primordialist narratives and abuses of history, Allison's conceptual and methodological flaws show how US nationalism is different only because it rests on the appropriation of a particular form of political system and values as distinctively American; yet it is similar to other nationalisms since it is based on abusing history, including the origins and nature of the political system American rhetoric claims to endorse. Wilsonianism, integral to US foreign policy, insofar as it is based on exporting democracy, is supposedly a lofty idealism, considered noble because imbued with well-sounding words like freedom and peace, which even Mearsheimer (2001), as an upholder of US interests, considers to be integral to American rhetoric. According to Mearsheimer (2001, 23), "Americans appear to have an especially intense antipathy toward balance-of-power thinking. The rhetoric of twentieth-century presidents, for example, is filled with examples of realism bashing. Woodrow Wilson is probably the most well-known example of this tendency, because of his eloquent campaign against balance-of-power politics during and immediately after World War I."

Yet Wilson's opposition to the balance of power did not rule out the fact that his aim was to extend US interests abroad. As Robert Tucker (2004, 95) argued, one may look at Wilson's Mexican diplomacy in 1916 as a prism for later things to come. At stake were American interests in Latin America and Wilson's concern with the press and promoting certain narratives for the public, in that case portraying a punitive expedition into another sovereign state as a nonmilitary endeavor (Wilson 1918). Wilsonianism was fraught with the very same contradictions of the rhetoric and practice of post-WW2 US administrations. While freedom and democracy have remained integral to contemporary US foreign policy, they have been often and notably utilized as pretexts for maintaining or extending US overseas interests. Fukuyama (2004b), for example, described Krauthammer's Wilsonianism as "'democratic globalism', a kind of muscular Wilsonianism […] that seeks to use U.S. military supremacy to support U.S. security interests and democracy simultaneously," no different from his own or Kissinger's "differential" support of democracy, that is when it suited US strategic interests. And it is in Wilsonian terms, as the strife for international peace under US aegis, that the endeavor to preserve the *Pax americana*, which Thucydides' trap is meant to rationalize, is framed.

6 Lofty Wilsonianism?

American messianism, a legacy of Roosevelt's "manifest destiny," which Hobson (1902) demystified at its inception, is often perceived today as a lofty Wilsonianism, as the need to spread American democracy (see Huntington 1991, 33–4) that led America to end its customary isolationism in 1917. Similarly to Kissinger decades later, "the twentieth century, Wilson believed, would force the Americans out of

their isolation" (Kohn 1957, 197). Yet American isolationism "came to an end […] in 1898, with the Spanish-American War," for reasons that were no different from those of other Western powers. (Kohn 1957, 190) Hobson (1902, 82–3) argued that

> the adventurous enthusiasm of President Roosevelt and his 'manifest destiny' and 'mission of civilisation' party must not deceive us. It is Messrs. Rockefeller, Pierpont Morgan, Hanna, Schwab, and their associates who need Imperialism and who are fastening it upon the shoulders of the great Republic of the West. They need Imperialism because they desire to use the public resources of their country to find profitable employment for the capital which otherwise would be superfluous.

Nevertheless, Kissinger (1994, 30) wrote that "it is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency, and continues to march to this day." Yet Wilsonianism, justifying "America's international role [based on a] messianic […] obligation […] to spread its principles throughout the world" (Kissinger 1994, 30) is but a form of US nationalism that mirrors the "civilizing mission" of the height of imperialism, as part of a process whereby "a gainful course is rendered more attractive by a tincture of disinterestedness." (Hobson 1902, 126) As Hobson (1902, 132) argued in ways applicable to the American *Weltanshauung*, "the gravest peril of Imperialism lies in the state of mind of a nation which becomes habituated to this deception and which has rendered itself incapable of self-criticism." In the context of Thucydides, Kirshner (2019, 7–8) argued something similar, indirectly also showing the relevance of Hobson: "it was not the power and designs of adversaries that led to Athenian defeat and ruin but rather hubris in the form of reckless overambition. Athens fell not because it was overtaken by rivals, but because it became intoxicated with the idea of its own greatness and could not recognize the limits of its own power." While Hobson's main focus was Britain, "the Pax Britannica and Pax Americana have more in common with one another than most international relations specialists—neoliberal or realist—are willing to admit." (Sondhaus 2007, 215) Kissinger's (1994, 809) words exemplify this self-complacency, although to Kissinger and neorealists the moral contradictions of power politics are unproblematic:

> as an approach to foreign policy, Wilsonianism presumes that America is possessed of an exceptional nature expressed in unrivaled virtue and unrivaled power. The United States was so confident of its strength and the virtue of its aims that it could envision fighting for its values on a worldwide basis. American exceptionalism must be the point of departure for a Wilsonian foreign policy.

US Wilsonianism is an exceptional form of nationalism, a "messianic" nationalism, distinct from Trumpist white suprematism, which for its part mirrors the many other national populisms across the world. Yet Du Bois (1917) already interpreted this sense of exceptionalism as being intertwined with white suprematism, considering the belief of the US as promoter of "freedom" and democracy paradoxical, insofar as it underlay a sense of superiority over the "darker peoples" as a continuation of the imperialist "civilizing" mission.

Wilsonianism, which is seldom if ever analyzed as a form of national chauvinism, was as integral to US imperialism at its inception as it is constitutive of American nationalism today. While it may be argued that the association with nationalism is not problematic, since nationalism is often seen as possibly liberal (see Mounk 2018; Tamir 2019), here rests the crux of the problem. While allegedly based on promoting democracy abroad, Wilsonianism past and present has little to do with political liberalism. Even John Stuart Mill (1859, 166), notwithstanding his paradoxical defense of empire (see Bell 2016) wrote: "I am not aware that any community has a right to force another to be civilized. So long as the sufferers by the bad law do not invoke assistance from other communities, I cannot admit that persons entirely unconnected with them ought to step in […] because it is a scandal to persons some thousands of miles distant." Contemporary Wilsonianism has not significantly changed from the ideological premises that Hobson (1902, 258) discussed with specific reference to the US:

> The notion that there exists one sound, just, rational system of government, suitable for all sorts and conditions of men, embodied in the elective representative institutions of Great Britain, and that our duty was to impose this system as soon as possible, and with the least possible modifications, upon lower races, […] is tending to disappear in this country, though the new headstrong Imperialism of America is still exposed to the taunt that "Americans think the United States has a mission to carry 'canned' civilisation to the heathen."

And by seeking to export its own political system, the US shows that its ideology conforms with Morgenthau's (1948, 193) description of nationalism:

> each nation comes to know again a universal morality, that is, its own national morality, which is taken to be the one which all the other nations ought to accept as their own. Instead of the universality of an ethics to which all nations adhere, we end up with the particularity of national ethics which claims the right to, and aspires toward, universal recognition.[20]

Upon becoming the world hegemonic power, US claims to universality materialized. Whereas the US–China rivalry can be considered to be over East Asian hegemony, it is framed in terms of a civilizational confrontation—which is nationalist, since the two contenders, as nations, constitute *grosso modo* distinct civilizations on their own—in which "a system of beliefs and ethical convictions [is] at stake […] [when] in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, none of the contestants on the international scene aspired to impose its own particular system of ethics, provided it had one, upon the others." (Morgenthau 1948, 195) And by virtue of what Kissinger (1994: 829) called "the American tendency to label nations neatly as either friend of foe," the US adopts a parochial attitude that is typical of the foreign policy of nationalism, as Ortega y Gasset (1929, 191) and Toynbee (1954, 621) already understood it.

[20] For criticisms of Morgenthau's interpretation of nationalism see Lerner (2022).

7 Democracy and Empire from Athens to the US

Endorsers and critics of Thucydides' trap often overlooked this fundamental point: Thucydides' trap, far from being a fact, contrary to what Allison (2017a, b: x) states—"denying Thucydides' Trap does not make it less real"—does not subsist. This is not to deny the cogency of the security dilemma central to realist thinking, whereby "a reciprocal dynamic of competition [is created], leaving the entire system more insecure." (Szanto 2022, 80) Yet Thucydides' trap reframes the security dilemma in ways that take for granted America's global role and presence in East Asia, and accounts for America's power acquisition as part of its struggle for democracy. Such interpretations, which seem to have been common currency in certain US intellectual milieux (Morley 2020a), can also be found in Huntington's hasty mention of the Greek historian in his *Clash of Civilizations*, from which Allison heavily drew.

In the context of wars between civilizational core states, Huntington (1996, 208–9) argued, "core state war could result from changes in the global balance of power among civilizations. Within Greek civilization, the increasing power of Athens, as Thucydides argued, led to the Peloponnesian War. Similarly, the history of Western civilization is one of 'hegemonic wars' between rising and falling powers." Had Huntington limited himself to the first part of the sentence, mentioning that Athens' power was increasing (which does not specify whether it was rising from a subaltern position, or it was becoming ever more powerful), the use of Thucydides could even have been fitting. Yet he elaborated, adding that such hegemonic wars are "between rising and falling powers." Neither Sparta nor Athens was rising or falling. Sparta's fear was based on the prospect that Athens may take over all Greece, which is different from a mere rise (Jaeger 1939; Thucydides 2006, 122).

In discussing the bleak prospects of an improbable yet possible Third World War between "the core states of the world's major civilizations," Huntington (1996, 312–3) prefigured that "the rise of China and the increasing assertiveness of this 'biggest player in the history of man' will place tremendous stress on international stability in the early twenty-first century. The emergence of China as the dominant power in East and Southeast Asia would be contrary to American interests as they have been historically construed." Conflating Huntington's two points quoted above, we may already find Thucydides' trap as early as 1996, as part of a US Cold War mentality that sees any other country that may possibly challenge the US world hegemonic role as a direct threat to America. While novelist Herman Wouk (1998, 126) coined the term, Wouk's "Thucydides' trap," "which now threatens to strangle, if not to destroy, our world," refers to the trap whereby "more than two millennia later we seem still trapped in Thucydides' world. None of the ways in which those quarrelsome Greeks behaved is suited to these dread times of nuclear menace; yet we still behave in those ways." In any case, resorting to Ancient Greece is a subtle way to give credit and legitimacy to American hegemonic presumption, perpetuating a self-righteousness that is inherent to nationalist narratives. And as even Morgenthau (1948, 193) stated, "nations […] oppose each other now as the standard-bearers of ethical systems, each of them of national origins and each of them claiming and aspiring to provide a supranational framework of moral standards which all the other nations ought to accept."

While the "trap" associates the US with Sparta and China with Athens, it does so only structurally. It is Athens and its democracy that resonate among American scholars and policymakers, although even for Jefferson, and not just the *Federalist*, "the democracies of ancient Greece […] represent[ed] an entirely different political form than does representative democracy." (Koch 1943, 152) As Allison (2017a, b, 28) himself put it, "from Thucydides, my second-year classmates and I learned about the long peace that preceded the great war between Athens and Sparta. We read about Athens's precious experiment in democracy and its unprecedented surge of creative achievement in every field." The parallel with Sparta is a mere expedient. It is Athens that strikes a chord with the American mind, given the shared democratic myth.[21] And I speak of "democratic myth," since, as Toynbee (1954, 538) argued, it was the American "representative system in which the people's control over the government was exercised at one remove [that] would, no doubt, have seemed an anemic dilution of Democracy to citizens of city–states like Florence or Athens, for whom Democracy had signified the direct participation of all the citizens in public affairs." At any rate, the Athenian democracy Allison refers to with admiration was no democracy even for Thucydides (2006, 211) himself, who explained that under Pericles, whose rule coincided with Athens' zenith, "what was nominally a democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen."

The American misappropriation of democracy, with the abandonment of the democracy/republic binary still present among the authors of the *Federalist*, who drew on the tradition of Montesquieu, was irreparably carried out by means of the Jeffersonian model of popular sovereignty inspired by Destutt de Tracy's sacralization of the will of the people and rejection of Montesquieu's separation of powers.[22] This is what democracy turned out to be worldwide through the establishment of America's global hegemony, political and cultural, and notwithstanding customary references to Montesquieu, when his separation of powers and meritocratic system do not really subsist, as already Cecil Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc (1911)

[21] Allison (2017a, xv) reiterates his stereotyped reliance on democracy as *the* political system: "Like so many others, Athens believed its advance to be benign. Over the half century that preceded the conflict, it had emerged as a steeple of civilization. Philosophy, drama, architecture, *democracy*, history, and naval prowess—Athens had it all, beyond anything previously seen under the sun." My emphasis in italics.

[22] With regards to Madison, Robert Dahl (1998, 17) even stated that "the plain fact is that the words *democracy* and *republic* did not (despite Madison) designate differences in types of popular government. What they reflected […] was a difference between Greek and Latin, the languages from which they came." Similarly, Fukuyama (1992, 187) turned Madison's words into an endorsement of democracy, when Madison (1787) stated that "theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions," and that in a republic, "the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose." This is to show how beliefs in democracy as the type of regime supposedly supported by the *Federalist* are ingrained even among US leading scholars. Yet "Publius," similarly to Kant, believed in the inherent difference between democracy and republic, while Montesquieu's views on the "well-regulated" democracy, assimilable to Publius' republic and Mill's "true democracy," envisaged limited political rights, insofar as "the people" could not aspire to positions of power, which (undemocratically by contemporary democratic standards) were supposed to be the preserve of competent and experienced individuals.

had pointed out with reference to the supposed democracy of Britain before WW1. Their analysis echoed Engels' (1891, 16) previous description of American politics as having fallen prey to "two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends—and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality exploit and plunder it." Repeated references to "democratic values" or "ideals" informing the US, as in Wilson, at the basis of Allison's distinction between the US and China, are hollow ideological statements that dismiss the Western tradition of meritocracy on which actual representation of the people would be based, both of which do not figure in America's lobbying and ochlocratic democracy, premised on sectional interests cloaked in a rhetoric of popular sovereignty that boils down to majority rule. And this version of democracy was already rejected by John Stuart Mill (1861, 169), who referred to it as the "falsely-called democracies which now prevail, and from which the current idea of democracy is exclusively derived," explaining that "looking at democracy in the way in which it is commonly conceived as the rule of the numerical majority, it is surely possible that the ruling power may be under the dominion of sectional or class interests, pointing to conduct different from that which would be dictated by impartial regard for the interest of all." (Mill 1861, 132–3).

Similarly to the US, Athens was rooted in its own democratic rhetoric, in the idea, expounded by Pericles in the Funeral Speech, that the might of Athens originated from its political system. Lebow and Kelly (2001, 604) argued that

> during the Cold War, the United States also showed some similarities with Athens. They shared an ideology of democracy and held themselves out as models for others to emulate. Athens saved Greece from the Persians and was the foremost democratic power in the Hellenic world. The United States helped to liberate Europe […]. Stylized visions of their recent pasts provided both polities with the ideological foundations for their respective hegemonies.

As a praise of democracy, Pericles' oration becomes a legitimation of Athenian might. In this regard, Snyder (2022, 126), in his laudable defense of Ukraine, wrote that "the most famous defense of democracy, the funeral oration of Pericles, is about the harmony of risk and freedom." Yet such interpretation, found also in Schama (2022), distorts Classical Antiquity, including Thucydides and ancient democracy. The Funeral Speech has been often taken uncritically as a eulogy of democracy, neglecting the nature of Athenian imperial power or the fact that Athens' greatness in its domestic politics was related to something different from the supposed "rule of the people": as Thucydides (2006, 211), again, described Athenian democracy under Pericles, "what was nominally a democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen." The common parallel between Athenian and American democracy is anachronistic since the former, as the original democracy, was a direct democracy, yet by modern standards an oligarchy, while present-day democracy would be considered an oligarchy, as also Arendt (1950) discussed with reference to the "democratic illusions" exploded by totalitarian movements in the Interwar period. Michels (1915, 417–20) went as far as discussing "the existence of oligarchical tendencies in

every form of democracy," arguing that "every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy."

While the Funeral Speech has been often taken as exemplifying an early "manifesto" of democracy (for a recent example see Fukuyama 2022), Strauss (1964a, b) showed how, for Thucydides, praise of Athenian democracy legitimizing imperial ambitions was only the expression of Pericles' thought. As Strauss (1964a, b, 151) put it, "the Funeral Speech expresses the sentiments of Pericles and not those of Thucydides. It is not Thucydides' fault if his readers [and we may include Fukuyama, Snyder, and Schama] are more impressed by the brilliant than by the unobtrusive." Although Thucydides was an Athenian military commander, a *strategos*, similarly to the other Athenian historian and military leader Xenophon, "this great Athenian preferred the Spartan manner to the Athenian manner." (Strauss 1964a, b, 151) What remains in Pericles' words is power—with Pericles "admit[ting] without hesitation the quasi-tyrannical character of his Athens' rule over her subject cities" (Strauss 1964a, b, 152)—which the democratic rhetoric justifies, then as now, with the excuse of exerting overseas influence through the exportation of democracy.

Ikenberry's (2004, 620) words echoed this point, beside showing key features of US "humanitarian" chauvinism, when he put that "the American order is hierarchical and ultimately sustained by economic and military power. But it is order infused with liberal characteristics and put at the service of supporting an expanding system of democracy and capitalism."[23] Based on the same premises, insofar as he did not question the motives of US overseas involvements, Fukuyama (2004b), referring to "the poorly executed nation-building strategy in Iraq," stated that it would "poison the well for future such exercises, undercutting domestic political support for a generous and visionary internationalism, just as Vietnam did." Similarly, Jervis (2002, 2) stated that "the United States is defending not traditional national interests […] but […] upholding values such as democracy, self-determination, and rejection of coercion as a means of changing the status quo." Yet such "well-sounding phrases" remind of Hobson's (1902, 129) remarks on "phrase-mongering Imperialism [which] does not recognize its falsehood." The same difficulty or impossibility of reconciling empire with justice was faced by Thucydides' Athenians, when the Athenian envoys sent to Sparta before the war seem unwilling or unable to solve "the tension between imperialism and justice." (Orwin 1986, 80) According to them, "justice [… is] inimical to the rule of the strongest, among cities just as within them.

[23] Such phrasing, whereby democracy and liberalism are used interchangeably, ubiquitous across contemporary Western IR and its critics (see, for example, Acharya 2017; Lawson and Zarakol 2023, 204), denotes the typical confusion of democracy with political liberalism. Wilson, because of his emphasis on exporting democracy, is usually referred to as a "liberal," and Wilsonianism is concomitant with the so-called "liberal internationalism." These are theoretical and historiographical confusions. Political liberalism, premised on abidance to the Rule of Law, coincides with Kant's and Mill's republicanism and is inherently different from democracy, which is but a system of government referring to the ways the ruler is selected, that is through popular suffrages. Political liberalism refers to a doctrine of government premised on limiting arbitrary power and its abuses and guaranteeing individual freedoms (Berlin 1958; von Hayek 1960). As von Hayek (1960, 104) put it, "liberalism is one of those doctrines concerning the scope and purpose of government from which democracy has to choose, the latter, being a method, indicates nothing about the aims of government."

For a city to rule as justly as possible therefore means for it to refrain as much as possible from ruling; this they claim that Athens does. To renounce rule entirely, however, they present as something impossible." (Orwin 1986: 83).

As Durham classicist Rhodes (2009) explained, that Athens was a democracy did not exclude the fact that its foreign policy was premised on the creation of an empire, a similar contradiction shared by imperial Britain. In any case, whether the US is an empire or not, as Ikenberry ponders, is not the real point: the question is whether the US carries out imperialist policies, that is the coercion of foreign governments and the imposition of its own type of institutions abroad, which is part and parcel of Wilsonianism and integral to what even Morgenthau (1948) described as the nationalist tendency of imposing one's own belief system on other states.

It is in the context of US messianism, exemplified by Kissinger's (1994, 835) concluding remarks to his *Diplomacy*—"the Wilsonian goals of America's past—peace, stability, progress, and freedom for mankind—will have to be sought in a journey that has no end"—that anxieties over possible decline and power transition lead to the elaboration of theories meant to rationalize such worries. And these theories, concerned with one's own state's primacy, imply deep concerns with notions of national greatness, whether for the US or other countries, which are integral to nationalism. Stressing this nationalist nature of realism and of the US "national interest" is relevant, as the assumption that realism is an imperial legacy, and that the US carries imperialist policies (see Go 2011; Jung 2022; Specter 2022; Maritan 2024), may be dismissed as specious by critics of such views. Fanon (1961, 313) forcefully wrote:

> two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions. […] The West saw itself as a spiritual adventure. It is in the name of […] the spirit of Europe, that Europe […] has justified her crimes and legitimized the slavery in which she holds the four-fifths of humanity.

8 Conclusion

This paper sought to underpin the ideological foundations of Thucydides' trap, which are based on stereotyped repetitions of democracy as *the* political system, in typical Wilsonian terms.[24] This particular form of nationalism, tied to a type of political system, similarly to other nationalist ideologies is based on feeble and specious

[24] Such repetitions can be found also in Rawls. Rawls (1993, xvi) stated that "political liberalism also supposes that a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not reject the essentials of a democratic regime." In Jeffersonian terms, Rawls (1971, 313) "assumed that some form of majority rule is justified as the best available way of insuring just and effective legislation. It is compatible with equal liberty and possesses a certain naturalness; for if minority rule is allowed, there is no obvious criterion to select which one is to decide and equality is violated." It might sound preposterous given Rawls' fame, yet the question of the politics of knowledge production might apply also in his case, considering the geopolitical context of his writing, namely America's struggle to legitimize its democracy in the struggle against the Soviet Union.

narratives and reconstructions of the past: Thucydides' trap is one such invention. The Jeffersonian emphasis on the legitimacy of popular sovereignty as majority rule (which the authors of the *Federalist* considered inimical to actual republicanism) ties into a US bias whereby China is stigmatized, in words, for not having adopted a Western-style democracy, in fact for its staggering rise that challenges US primacy (Milanovic 2020), which Allison's notion is meant to rationalize empirically.[25] Even Kissinger (1994, 830) seemed to suggest the existence of such bias when he stated that "for four years after the events of Tienanmen Square in 1989, [the] dialogue [between Washington and Beijing] was inhibited by the American refusal to engage in high-level contacts—a measure never employed against the Soviet Union even at the height of the Cold War." At the same time, the trap has been popularized among Chinese policymakers to legitimize the rise of China as an alternative to US hegemony or to reassure the US that China does not wish to fall in the "trap."

As Strauss (1964b, 54) put it "an adequate understanding of the principles, as elaborated by the classics, may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis […] of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application […] of these principles to our tasks." Now, Allison's use of Thucydides is based on an inadequate understanding of the classics and on decontextualizing one single sentence through an inaccurate translation that is turned into a deterministic interpretation of the causes of the Peloponnesian War. To Thucydides and the Greeks, human agency remained a fundamental aspect of life (Pohlenz 1947). As Aristophanes showed in what was a widespread belief in Classical Antiquity (Musti 1995), Pericles even found an all-Greek war desirable to boost his popularity, since his power was being undermined by opposing factions (Burckhardt 1900).

Allison's thought, as that of neoconservatives and realists, is steeped in the notion of state power and the "national interest," which implies a nationalist understanding of one's own state. The state incorporates the restricted elites with vested interests that Mosca studied with little resonance in IR theory. And it is these elites who crave for power and the aggrandizement of the state through public expenditure (Hobson 1902), legitimized through the top-down manipulation of the wealth of historical material and the formation of crude nationalist categories and narratives. While Morgenthau (1948, 73) acknowledged that "when we speak of the power or the foreign policy of a certain nation, we can only mean in empirical terms the power or the foreign policy of certain individuals who belong to the same nation," thus seemingly mirroring Marxian interpretations and elite theories, this insight has been overlooked by later realists and Morgenthau himself, with their emphasis on the "national interest."

As the Peloponnesian War shows, it was individual ambitions that made state "interests," as in the case of the Athenian Alcibiades, Plato's former disciple and leading Athenian demagogue who pushed for the ruinous expedition to Sicily (see

[25] When, for example, Wilson (1918, 133) stated in 1916 "I believe in the ordinary man. If I did not believe in the ordinary man I would move out of a democracy and, if I found an endurable monarchy, I would live in it. The very conception of America is based upon the validity of the judgments of the average man," he reiterated his belief in popular sovereignty, which differed considerably from Mill's "true" democracy and Kant's republicanism, based on competent rule for the benefit of the public.

Forde 1989). Treating the state as an abstract entity capable of having its own interests, namely maximizing power—as per Morgenthau (1948) and Mearsheimer (2001)—reminds of Brubaker's (1996, 13) caveat of considering nations as "cohesive collective units capable of coherent action." Realist structural dynamics exist if the intellectual and political elites remain entrenched in certain ideological positions, the American in their belief in US messianic exceptionalism and the Chinese in a nationalist revanchism that manipulates the "century of humiliation" for regime legitimation. In concluding his *Diplomacy* with a testament to his belief in America's messianic role, Kissinger (1994, 829) makes one wonder how such belief could coexist with his conviction in the need for "good American relations with China."

American nationalism is exceptional since it resorts to ideological genealogies tied to a particular type of political regime, or better a distortion of it, with Thucydides' trap as the most recent notable attempt at legitimizing it. Such narratives underlie the elite formation of nationalist beliefs, the result of "the element of artefact, invention and social engineering" (Hobsbawm 1990, 10), whereby, as Harvey (1989, 123) put it, "dominant ideologies [are] cultivated by the mass media, religious and educational institutions, the various arms of state apparatus." This in turn makes nationalism an "endemic condition" of everyday life, to use Billig's (1995, 6) wording, with notions like Thucydides' trap becoming ubiquitous among public opinion makers and political practitioners, in particular in the context of the US cultural hegemony of the last century, since in the West, and beyond, people are bound to engage with ideas originating in the US, no matter how theoretically feeble they may be. American defenses of democracy essentialize "representative" democracy into what is not, namely, an actual representative system, when it is representative of majorities. As already Destutt de Tracy (1811, 13) understood "representative democracy," this was supposed to be the "will of the nation" or the "general will" á la Rousseau.[26] By being the expression of the will of the people, popular sovereignty is the representation of majorities, as Jefferson conceived it following de Tracy (Koch 1943), but not Kant's republican constitution or the representative system envisioned by Mill and Mosca and based on the "impartial regard for the interest of all." (Mill 1861, 132–3) Mosca (1923, 258), an upholder of the representative

[26] According to de Tracy (1811, 44), "the greater portion of the public functions are conferred by the suffrages of the citizens." And, again, "there is by *right*, only one power in society, and that is the will of the nation or society, from which all authority flaws." (de Tracy 1811, 103) In considering Montesquieu's system of balancing "erroneous and indefensible," public authorities should have "recourse to the general will." (de Tracy 1811, 117) It is popular sovereignty that prevails in de Tracy and his admirer and translator, Jefferson: "a nation cannot be united for any length of time, nor make remonstrances, supplications, or complaints, without recollecting or perceiving that it has the incontestable and inherent right to give its orders and dictate its will." (de Tracy 1811, 126) The "general will" means majority rule: "laws are declared to be formed for the governed, not the governed for them; consequently they only exist in virtue of the will of the majority of those governed, and should change when the will changes." (de Tracy 1811, 154), for which see also Wilson at note 19 above. Jefferson's version of republicanism, different from the *Federalist*, Kant and Mill, "implie[d] lawful government based on majority will," (Koch 1943, 152) similarly to Rousseau and de Tracy. It is through Jefferson, "proselytizer, translator, editor, sponsor for publication, and general representative in behalf of Tracy's author's rights." (Koch 1943, 56), that American democracy came to owe more to the French revolutionary tradition than the tradition of the *Federalist Papers*, whose authors "express[ed] an active fear of the multitude or majority." (Koch 1943, 149).

system, described such distortions as "the narrow and strictly limited interpretation that was given to the theory of popular sovereignty by Rousseau and his followers of the democratic school, who took popular sovereignty to mean that any government in any country should emanate from the numerical majority of its citizens." This is American democracy, the Jeffersonian model, whose sanctity is too often uncritically taken at face value.

Allison, similarly to Huntington, may allegedly work towards cross-civilizational dialogue to avoid conflict. Yet his theory is steeped in the construction of unbridgeable civilizational differences, based for both the US and China on what Hobson (1902, 107) referred to as "a nationalism which emphasizes the exclusive rather than the inclusive aspect of patriotism […] form[ing] the most dangerous […] factor of modern politics." And this nationalism is based on the interests of restricted groups, which according to Hobson (1902, 107) impose "their private advantages, which rest upon international antagonism, to the detriment of *the national advantage, which is identical with that of other nations*."[27]

Beliefs that Western and Chinese civilizations are antithetical legitimize fears of conflict. Yet it is the ideological use of difference driven by nationalist understandings of the "national interest" that contributes to enmity and potential conflict. Structural dynamics exist, but they are steeped in conflicting ideologies, and on the part of America the unwavering belief in the sanctity of majority rule. The invention of Thucydides' trap builds on beliefs in America's messianic role of spreading its gospels, with Wilsonianism past and present being premised on the belief in the necessity to export democracy as *the* political system, albeit mitigated sometimes by policies of restraint. The US missionary zeal exemplifies a distinct form of nationalism, whose motivations echoes earlier imperialists' "civilizing mission." And the belief in the superiority of one's own political creed, traditionally loaded with universalistic aspirations typical of American chauvinism, is set to fuel enmity, which makes Thucydides' trap the self-fulfilling prophecy of a nationalist mindset. As Arendt (1945, 463) concluded her work on the interrelated imperialism and nationalism, in ways applicable to the caducity of the *Imperium americanum,*

> chauvinism may be […] the result of over-seas imperialism. It is […] the only ism that prepares the nation or the people for expansion, induces it into that great adventure which essentially is beyond the possibilities of a national body politic and lures it, under the pretext of empire-building, in ruin of imperialism. For the only limit in space of permanent expansion is destruction and its only limit in time is death.

Author contribution The author confirms sole responsibility for the study conception, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

[27] My emphasis in italics.

Funding Open access funding provided by Mahidol University. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript. The authors have no relevant financial or nonfinancial interests to disclose.

Data availability The author confirms that the data generated or analyzed during this study are available within this article.

Conflict of interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Code availability No code was utilized in this study.

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